



Ireland: Water charges revolt changes political landscape

Bernie McAdam Mon, 25/05/2015 - 10:23

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Ireland's continuing water charges rebellion has become a political nightmare for the Irish ruling class. As a General Election looms within the year, the reigning Fine Gael/Labour coalition faces deep unpopularity and, in the case of the Labour Party, a potential meltdown in the polls. It now seems that a lurch to the left in Irish politics may well see increased parliamentary representation for Sinn Fein and a number of far left socialists in the new Dail.

Irish politics has been significantly shaken up by the crisis triggered by the government's attempts to implement water charges on the Irish people. The background to this crisis lay in the Great Credit Crunch spectacularly ending the Celtic Tiger's years of boom. The subsequent years of deep austerity directed by the Troika (the IMF, ECB and EU) and imposed by willing Irish governments, including the Fianna Fail/Green and Fine Gael/Labour coalitions, dramatically slashed Irish workers' living standards. Emigration came back again with a vengeance.

Although the initial response to the plethora of attacks was a wave of demonstrations by tens of thousands of students, pensioners and trade unionists, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) never saw fit to go beyond these to organise concerted industrial action in defence of workers. This should come as no surprise; for years, the trade union bureaucracy had colluded in such attacks with their Social Partnership deals. This only emboldened the coalition governments to go even further.

Budget after budget slammed into public services, wages and jobs. Hikes in VAT and a new property tax followed and now a water tax. It is this tax which appears to be the last straw that has broken the camel's back. Irish people already pay for their water through general taxation. Unrelenting austerity to pay for the bank bailouts has finally provoked a rebellion on a scale that has surprised everyone.

Strength of revolt

Last year, October 11 saw 100,000 march in Dublin. On November 1, over 200,000 marched in over 100 protests throughout Ireland against the water charges. The revolt has not subsided. This year has seen more protests like the 80,000 who marched in Dublin on March 21 and on another huge 'Bin your Bill' demonstration on April 18.

We have also seen the growth of resistance on working class estates as residents try to stop the installation of water meters. Clashes with the Gardai have been numerous. Many arrests have been made including that of Paul Murphy TD, and pickets of Gardai stations and the Department of Justice have followed. Now tens of thousands of residents are set to refuse to pay the water charges.

The Right2Water, R2W, campaign has been formed on the back of these mobilisations. It is supported by five trade unions; MANDATE, UNITE, CWU, OPATSI and CPSU. It is also supported by Sinn Fein and the Socialist Party-backed Anti Austerity Alliance (AAA) and the Socialist Workers Party-backed People before Profit (PbP).

Unfortunately, R2W, under the influence of Sinn Fein and the trade union leaders, has not called for mass non payment. AAA has consistently argued for a mass boycott of the water charges and PbP have eventually come round to this line as well. Both groups are now calling on R2W to organise a mass non payment campaign. Paul Murphy (AAA) was

elected as a TD on expressly this basis and successfully outmanoeuvred Sinn Fein, favourites to win in Dublin South West, who refused to commit to this goal.

Is victory in sight?

There is no doubt that non-payment is a reality for tens of thousands of residents. No doubt either that the government want to keep this quiet. The arrogant Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, could only advise Paul Murphy and fellow AAA and SP TD Ruth Coppinger to 'toddle along' to the Irish Water briefing room in Leinster House, in response to a question in the Dail about the numbers who are refusing to pay. The two TDs did just that and were told, unsurprisingly, that 'it would not be helpful to give payment figures now'.

The government has threatened to introduce new legislation which will deduct the water charges from wages, welfare or pensions. Ruth Coppinger said 'If this legislation ever happens, people have nothing to fear, it does not change anything, there will be no penalties until after the next General Election by which point a boycott can have forced the government to abolish the charges'. She argues that enforcing the penalties would require a court case and the sheer weight of numbers would block the courts.

This scenario, painted by the SP, is not a sure-fire road to victory. It is quite possible that non payment on a gigantic scale could defeat the government. It is, of course, right and crucial to deepen and spread this campaign. But we cannot rely on a future government being 'forced' to abolish the charges under the pressure of a mass boycott. Armed with a new 'mandate' to govern, they might well face the protest down. Neither should we underestimate the government's resolve to enforce penalties even if it does clog up the courts.

How to win

The Irish state has successfully imposed its austerity because of a lack of resistance from the trade union leadership. Their collaboration decisively put industrial action off the agenda. The task now is to translate the massive anger and mobilisations against the water charges into a movement within the workplaces and the unions. The need is for mass coordinated strikes that would take this struggle onto a higher level, capable of achieving victory more quickly.

No one doubts the difficulties of building industrial action. Not least because the union leaders, including the R2W affiliates, will be the main stumbling block. That is why anti austerity activists within the unions need to be sharply critical of their leaders and turn that criticism into building rank and file groups within and across the unions to launch a fight back. What is needed is a transformation of union organisation at all levels so that action can be democratically decided and taken; with the established leaders where possible, without them, and even against them, if necessary.

It is this perspective that has been missing from the policies of the AAA (SP) and PbP (SWP). While it is good that R2W union leaders are taken to task on the question of non payment, their grip on the union machine needs to be challenged and broken from within. Rank and file networks should demand that their unions boycott the installation process. They should fight for a campaign of industrial action against the water charges and every austerity measure. To ignore the union leaders' collaboration is to let them off the hook!

The R2W campaign must be turned into a national body, democratically based on local Councils of Action that reflect the depth and breadth of the movement. Local groups are already resisting the installation of water meters and have been attacked by Gardai. The need for local self defence is a burning question for the campaign.

Equally pressing is the need to link the local groups on the estates to workplaces and the unions. The aim must be to build a Council of Action, composed of delegates from working class organisations in every area, that can decide and control a programme of action to defeat the water charges and roll back the tide of austerity once and for all.

Time for politics

The struggle against water charges has shaken the Irish political order profoundly. A sure sign of this is when trade

union leaders, like those involved in R2W, start hosting conferences to discuss launching a political platform and considering support for a range of candidates. The decline of the pro austerity Labour Party and the rise of Sinn Fein, which claims to be anti austerity, is clearly connected to this new initiative.

In the wake of Syriza's victory in Greece, Sinn Fein's national chairperson, Declan Kearney, called for the building of a new Irish left alternative. He said 'formal political discussion should commence in Ireland on how to forge consensus between Sinn Fein, progressive independents, the trade union movement, grassroots communities and the non sectarian left' with the aim of forming a Left coalition government.

SIPTU General President Jack O'Connor, responding positively to this, also wants 'an entirely left wing government' though his beloved Labour Party had 'no choice' but to enter a Fine Gael coalition austerity government 'to try and mitigate the damage!' By instigating water charges no doubt! The trend is clear, as even Labour trade union leaders cosy up to Sinn Fein.

From a different angle, but on a similar course, comes Dr Helena Sheehan, Chair of the Left Forum, which came out of the collapse of the United Left Alliance, saying 'we need a new broad left party, a Syriza type party'. She says that Labour and Sinn Fein are not left enough and Trotskyist and communist parties have had their day. Her solution is a new left party 'converging with forces stemming from the republican tradition in an alliance with Sinn Fein that might eventually form the basis of a Left government'.

In contrast to this trend, both AAA and PbP have issued a joint statement welcoming the R2W union leaders' conferences to discuss a political initiative. However, they stress, quite correctly, that there must be a democratic, bottom up, participatory approach involving all sections of the water charges movement. As well as taking a principled, anti-austerity position and openly calling for non-payment of the water charges, the initiative should also stand for the separation of church and state. It should fight for a Left government and reject any coalition with Fine Gael, Fianna Fail or the Labour Party.

Although their joint statement does not mention Sinn Fein, AAA and PbP are clearly right to be worried at the growth of an axis of Sinn Fein, trade union leaders and other independents. Sinn Fein is implementing austerity in the north as part of the Executive, and it is opportunistically using left wing rhetoric in the south to excuse its lack of any perspective of direct action against austerity. No wonder the do nothing union bureaucrats are cosying up.

R2W have now issued policy documents for consultation that could form the basis of voting for candidates for a 'Progressive Irish government'. Policies around rights to water, health, housing, education, employment and democratic reforms may well constitute acceptable reforms but the draft documents unrealistically expect them to be implemented within the framework of a capitalist economy! Crucially, there is no commitment to stopping all the cuts and reversing those that have been made or a rejection of coalition with austerity parties.

The AAA/PbP statement is a welcome challenge to R2W and states the bare minimum case for mobilising a new political initiative. However, its principled anti-austerity message needs to be used as a means of kick starting the process of a building a new mass working class and socialist party. It should not limit itself to just an electoral pact like the failed United Left Alliance (ULA).

A new workers' party

It is not so long since the United Left Alliance collapsed. The two key organisations, SP and SWP, squandered a great opportunity for building a new party. In the 2011 election, the ULA secured 5 TD's on a clear anti-cuts and anti-coalition basis. However, the ULA itself never became more than an electoral non-aggression pact. What went wrong? We have covered this in detail elsewhere; <http://www.fifthinternational.org/content/ireland-united-left-alliance-b...> [1]

The ULA never developed into a single organisation. Its national steering committee, composed of representatives of the main groups, decided the key issues. Powerless national conferences and little commitment to building unified local branches meant that no headway was made in building a united organisation. The SP and SWP organised their own

campaigns and recruited to their organisations. Little wonder that the non-aligned members grew increasingly frustrated. Above all, though, there was no serious perspective of building a new party out of the ULA. That, of course, would have required a wide ranging discussion of such a party's programme.

There is little to suggest that the main component parts of the old ULA have learnt any of these lessons. Yet, the political situation in Ireland cries out for a new workers' party and if the left does not get its act together then Sinn Fein will surely outflank them. So how can we achieve a left unity which can represent working class interests?

The first step in establishing a new national organisation is to agree the best way of stopping the austerity offensive on Irish workers. This would have to be based on direct action and strikes, not just electoral advances. A bold revolutionary policy of building Councils of Action committed to all-out mass strikes should be adopted. It is these workers' Councils that could then be the basis of a really democratic workers' government, prepared to move against the banks and the capitalist state.

The next step is vital. A new organisation has to define itself. It cannot exist in a vacuum for long as the demise of the ULA proved. It can only define itself by the programme it takes into the working class movement. There will, of course, be serious arguments and differences over this so we need a democratic structure that allows the different policies and traditions of the component groups and individuals to be addressed.

There needs to be maximum discussion and the freedom to organise as a minority through factions and tendencies. At the same time, there has to be maximum unity of action when a line is agreed, the kind of unity workers on strike would expect of all their comrades. The ULA steered clear of an honest discussion on programme, no doubt thinking that it would wreck the whole project. In reality, however, it was the lack of such discussion that eventually contributed to wrecking it.

Revolutionary alternative

The League for a Fifth International believes that, in the struggle for left unity and a new workers' party in Ireland, socialists should seek to win any new organisation to a revolutionary socialist programme. Failure to do this will inevitably lead down the road of sell out and compromise that has plagued both the Labour Party and Sinn Fein.

A revolutionary alternative will have to address three key issues.

First of all is the crisis of leadership within the trade union movement. Trade unions in the south have been committed to Social Partnership for years and this has allowed austerity to rip through workers' living standards. The draconian attack on public services in the north poses the question once more, how can the rank and file wrest control of their unions the better to fight for their interests? What strategy is needed for victory against the combined forces of the Troika, Britain and the southern Irish regime and how is that to be linked to the fight for socialism?

Secondly, what action programme do we need in the fight for women's rights and the separation of church and state in the two failed and reactionary states in Ireland? The fantastic victory for marriage equality in the recent referendum in the south, the Unionist resistance to it in the north and the recent debates on abortion in the Dail all highlight the need for a secular policy and a struggle to build a working class women's movement in the fight against women's oppression.

Thirdly, an all-Ireland party, fighting austerity north and south, will also have to wage a struggle against the day to day repression handed out to Irish republicans and their communities in the six counties by the British state. The northern state has long been the source of the sectarianism that has fatally divided Catholic and Protestant workers. The Good Friday Agreement has been used as a vehicle to safeguard the Unionist veto and Partition as much as it has been used as an excuse for savage cuts. Any new socialist formation has to address the national question and call for British withdrawal and the dismantling of the northern state.

Socialists should seize the present opportunities now and start the job of building a new party unequivocally dedicated to a 32 county Workers' Republic!

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